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Iconoclasm and strategic thought: Islamic State and cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria

Introduction

Islamic State's destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq is neither random collateral damage nor necessarily an exercise in barbarism.[1] It is targeted and ideologically explicable. It represents a core feature of Islamic State's strategic design. Strategy, in this context, refers to the 'use of available resources to gain any objective'.[2] In conditions of armed conflict, strategy denotes how actions affect one's enemy. This understanding provides a foundation to evaluate outcomes in war. However, not all outcomes in war are defined solely against the enemy combatant. In circumstances where the objective is to influence a different or wider audience 'strategy must adjust to the audience rather than assume that the application of force will be universally understood in terms of its effect against the enemy'.[3] This study shall, therefore, illustrates that the destruction of cultural artefacts targets much more than the heritage itself.

In assessing the strategic intent of Islamic State's approach to cultural heritage sites it is necessary to locate this analysis within the strategic literature. In this context, iconoclasm, as a strategy, represents a logical and instrumental means of employing violence to achieve political ends. The first section of this paper, therefore, identifies the independent variables necessary to effect the application of strategy to cultural heritage and to achieve the objectives of Islamic State. To illuminate key questions surrounding the destruction of heritage in order to achieve political objectives the analysis applies principles first enunciated in Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. The argument here is that the practice of iconoclasm provides a framework to understand a strategy of cultural destruction. It contends further that strategic iconoclasm manifests when three independent variables are present and interconnected, namely: the degradation and

delegitimization of the existing social and cultural fabric; the removal of all reference to a previous society or culture; and an attempt to reconstruct society in keeping with a new totalitarian vision or ideology.

The study, therefore, examines whether Islamic State's management of cultural heritage exhibits this trinity of factors. To test the presence of these variables three case studies will be assessed: the destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra; the demolition of Sufi, Shi'a and Sunni shrines generally; and the destruction of sites in the city of Mosul. The analysis reveals that the manner in which Islamic State addresses cultural heritage exhibits one of two tendencies: *pragmatism* in order to extract the most political value out of heritage sites, or *dogmatism* in accordance with its politically religious ideological perspective. The final sections evaluate the case study evidence through the lens of strategic theory. The resulting analysis shows whether the trinity is manifest in the cases studied and the utility of such a strategy for implementing the Islamic State vision.

Clausewitz and Culture

For Western and many non-Western observers the destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones is ethically and politically untenable. Franceso Rutelli, former Italian Minister of Culture and Tourism, argued that designating places like Palmyra as World Heritage Sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) represented 'a victory of the culture of the West… until the rude awakening at the hands of the ISIS cutthroats. The cutthroats who reinvented, within the framework of a profound conflict within Islam, systematic iconoclasm'.[45] The identification and denunciation of cultural barbarism, however, provides only a partial explanation of the phenomenon. Strategic theory illustrates how 'iconoclasm' operates as a functional tool that explains *why* heritage is targeted in conflict zones.

In *On war*, Clausewitz noted: 'even the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date'.[6] Taken to its theoretical extreme, Clausewitz argues there is no definitive end to war, for there is always the possibility of conflict resuming when political conditions change. Indeed, the potential for a resumption of hostilities is inherent in any resistance to a new political order.[7] Elaborating Clausewitz's observation, a singular act of will against the new political order, seemingly as insignificant as an unarmed demonstrator's defiance of an oncoming tank, or stones thrown at soldiers of occupation, exhibit an intrinsic political meaning.[8] Such acts of resistance, no matter how minor, may be harbingers of more organized violence. The questions that arise are: what gives resistance its agency to become active in the first place; and, is it conceivable, theoretically, to suppress resistance completely? To answer the first question requires insight into the individual mind of the rebel, whilst the second requires determining whether it is possible to change, or conquer, the mind of every individual who might conceivably adopt an adversarial stance.[9] It is within this context, as we shall show, that a strategy of iconoclasm functions.

The widespread destruction of buildings in Bosnia in the 1990s affords a relatively recent example of the attempt to wage war on the opponent's mind. Martin Coward suggests that the assault on the built environment constituted an attack on the identities of the communities that owned or shared them.[10] Embodying community values over time, the built environment becomes a logical target in the context of ethno-nationalist wars: symbolic of the culture to be eliminated.[11] Thus, targeting the physical space represents the endeavour to change the nature of a community in order to 'erase its existence and/or prevent the possibility of its (continued) existence'.[12]

From this perspective, the fighting in Bosnia during Yugoslavia's wars of dissolution witnessed Croatian forces attempting to alter the existing social fabric by removing all reference to its former political condition. For example, Mostar's 500 year-old 'Stari Most' bridge long connected the ethnic Croat and Bosnian Muslim parts of the town. A significant heritage artefact, it symbolized the broader ethno-religious plurality of Bosnia prior to the wars of dissolution. First constructed in the sixteenth century, the bridge was pivotal to trade and transport across the Ottoman Empire. The passage of different peoples through Mostar formed over time a distinctive, syncretic, ethno-cultural Bosnian identity where heterogeneous communities peacefully cohabited. The bridge symbolized this pluralist culture.[13] Therefore, the destruction of the bridge represented the rejection of a heterogeneous identity, delegitimizing what had gone before, whilst simultaneously authenticating Tudjman's message of ethnic exclusivity. As Riedlmayer observes, by 1993 the bridge served no strategic value, having already been damaged beyond use, but its obliteration served to eradicate the 'collective memory' of what the bridge signified.[14]

Yet, in November 1993 the Bosnian-Croat Army, shelled structure until it collapsed into the River Neretva.[15] The act of destruction was entirely symbolic. The then president of Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, advocated the creation of the statelet of 'Herceg-Bosna' as a home for Bosnian Croats and Mostar was to be its capital. For this to happen Tudjman wanted the town 'cleansed' of non-Croatians.[16] The consequence of Tudjman's ethno-nationalist vision forced Bosnian Muslims to flee western Mostar into the ghettoized east, which the Croatians then subjected to siege and bombardment.[17]

The destruction of the Stari Most bridge represents what Rambelli and Reinder call a concerted attempt at 'total obliteration'.[18] Riedlmayer's account of the broader campaign of destruction in Bosnia estimates that over a thousand 'mosques, hundreds of Catholic churches

and scores of Orthodox churches, monasteries, private and public libraries, archives, and museums were shelled, burned, and dynamited, and in many cases even the ruins were removed by nationalist extremists in order to complete the cultural and religious 'cleansing' of the land they had seized'.[19] Presenting data from the Institute for Protection of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of Bosnia Herzegovina, he demonstrated that between 1992 and 1995 over eighty percent of congressional mosques, forty-six percent of small local mosques, forty-eight percent of shrines and mausolea, and thirty percent of buildings built through religious endowments had been attacked.[20] Consequently, 'by burning the documents, by razing houses of worship and bulldozing graveyards, the nationalists who overran and 'cleansed' hundreds of towns and villages in Bosnia were trying to insure themselves against the possibility that the people expelled and dispossessed might one day return to reclaim their homes and properties'.[21]

Any attempt to change people's minds, forcibly or otherwise, requires a process of escalation. As Clausewitz observed, 'if the enemy is to be coerced you must place him in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make. The hardships of that situation must of course not be transient – at least not in appearance'.[22] Yet, simply placing an enemy in an unpleasant situation is not to conquer, or even change the opponent's mind. The potential for dissent and resistance remains inherent in any situation that does not result in the absolute obliteration of every facet of the enemy. The escalatory tendency in war always pushes in this direction.

An earlier twentieth century example evinces this tendency. The Nazi occupation of Warsaw in World War II saw, at the outset of hostilities, the Luftwaffe target the city's historic sites, as the Nazis considered them representative of Jewish and Slavic culture that required obliteration. Following the occupation of the city the Reich deployed the *Verbrennungs und Vernichtungskommando* – Burning and Destruction Detachments – tasked with enacting Hans

Frank's edict that 'Warsaw will get what it deserves – complete annihilation'.[23] The Nazi destruction of Warsaw was neither opportunistic nor simply collateral damage but central to the policy of *Lebensraum*, which envisioned a *Neue deutsche Stadt Warschau* ('New German City of Warsaw'). In keeping with the Pabst Plan for Warsaw, the intent was to reconstruct the city by replicating the architectural ideals of other German provincial towns according to design principles that determined everything from street cleaning to transport systems in order to rebuild Warsaw as a 'model city'.[24]

The subsequent internment of the Jews and other 'decadent' elements of the city's population in ghettoes anticipated the final solution to extinguish all opposition to Nazi rule. As Einwohner noted, a population that is 'isolated, politically powerless and targeted for extermination by a powerful regime', could not be expected to mount any collective resistance.[25] However, the Jewish Ghetto Uprisings of 1943-44 demonstrated otherwise. Interestingly, Einwohner argued that the uprisings might not have happened if the conditions inside the ghettoes were not so dire. Paradoxically, it was only when the interned realized the hopelessness of their situation that they planned resistance. Moreover, the realization 'facilitated the construction of a motivational frame that equated resistance with honor and dignity'.[26]

Such resistance intimates that all sides have agency within war. As Clausewitz maintained: 'war is not the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass but always a collision of two living forces'.[27] Just because you expect an adversary to conform to your coercion does not necessarily mean they will. The Nazis may well have believed that interning the residents of Warsaw in ghettoes and systematically changing the DNA of the urban environment would render any further resistance futile. What they did not anticipate was that people with nothing to lose were not necessarily going to accept the destiny the Nazis had predetermined for them. If the death camps were the residents' ultimate fate then fighting to die with honour and dignity would be no

worse than dying at Treblinka or Auschwitz. The result of this Nazi miscalculation was that the ghetto dwellers escalated the conflict by revolting. It might be argued that the architects of the uprisings also miscalculated by over-escalating the conflict against a clearly stronger opponent with little prospect of success. The Nazis were ideologically prepared to exterminate the inhabitants of the ghettoes no matter the cost. Himmler's response to the uprisings elucidated the point: 'the city must completely disappear from the surface of the earth and serve only as a transport station for the Wehrmacht. No stone can remain standing. Every stone must be razed to its foundation'.[28] In suppressing the uprisings the Nazis destroyed the city's major cultural and religious sites including: the Bruhl and Saxon Palaces, the churches of Saints Alexander, John, Mary, Kazimierz, Hyacinth, and Martin, as well as historic collections of Jewish manuscripts. The uprisings, however, were the catalyst not the cause of the destruction. They energized the Germans to escalate a process of cultural obliteration to destroy and then re-make the city along Nazi principles – a policy they already had in mind. The Nazis, in other words, embarked on a deliberate strategy of iconoclasm – cultural destruction. It is to the character of this understanding that we next turn.

Iconoclasm as a Strategy

The etymology of the noun iconoclasm has enjoyed a complex history and presents definitional difficulties because the term is essentially contestable.[29] Its principal reference is religious. The notion is premised on a contested view of the primacy of the role an image plays in a culture or a religion. A compound of two Greek words *eikon* and *klasma* (to break) implies iconoclasm denotes the rejection and destruction of cherished beliefs and images. It does not necessarily connote a negative value judgement. As studies by Patrick Collinson, Marshall G. Hodgson and David Freedberg have demonstrated in different ways, iconoclasm transmogrifies into a form of

iconophobia, a distrust of all images that becomes an accepted cultural attitude premised on religious value and the fear of false idols.[30] However, the historic practice within monotheistic religions of iconomachy has in the post-religious West, as Francesco Rutelli's usage cited above shows, assumes a pejorative connotation. Consequently, UNESCO usage equates iconoclasm with barbarism.

This modern secular usage, nevertheless, is somewhat incoherent. Thus, both the 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Afghan Taliban and the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square might be considered explicit acts of iconoclasm. Yet to label them as such does not necessarily imply a moral valuation. To judge one barbaric and the other heroic would constitute a category mistake: that is, confusing things of one kind and presenting them as something else.[31] Both acts destroyed icons of a previous idolatrous era, *Jahiliya* (pre-Islamic) and Ba'athist, respectively. Absent value judgements, there is no difference between the iconoclastic acts.

In this regard, iconoclasm, like the word 'terrorism', has become value-laden. The terms of its historical and etymological emergence contribute a further layer of semantic difficulty. James Noyes, for instance, argues that the term *iconoclast* first entered the European lexicon in 1595 as a result of the spread of Calvinism across the continent. Even so, the practice of iconoclasm can be identified in seventh century Arabia. Indeed, in the wake of the Ummayad siege of Constantinople (717 ACE) by Caliph Suleyman, the Byzantine Emperor, Leo III, first introduced a series of *eikon klasmic* edicts banning the worship of images between 726 and 729 ACE. Consequently, applying terms to entirely different historical and cultural contexts highlights the need to exercise care when applying universal judgements to particular words, especially as the term 'iconoclasm' does not have an Arabic equivalent.

Despite these semantic caveats the term parsimoniously applied does possess explanatory utility. Simply put, iconoclasm is the breaking of images, idols or icons for a political and/or religious purpose. This might entail its use as a particular tactic within a broader campaign of violence. There is, moreover, a further dimension to iconoclasm that transforms it into strategy. Such a strategic appraisal of the practice of iconoclasm requires that preconceived values do not affect the appraisal of the means and ends the iconoclast seeks.

From this perspective, the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, through systematic heritage destruction, altering the fabric of society by changing the population demographic, and centralization of power, in order to create *Neue deutsche Stadt Warschau*, exhibited all the elements of the *concept* of iconoclasm. Furthermore, each element was contingent on one another, but consistent in creating the interlocking effect required to produce a *logic* of iconoclasm. An analogous logic may be identified in the Balkans conflict. The Croat forces destroyed secular and symbolic heritage, and altered the composition of society through segregation and ghettoization for the purpose of turning Mostar into the capital of a newly formed statelet of Herceg-Bosna. Accordingly, three linked variables must be present for the manifestation of iconoclasm as a strategic logic: firstly, the degradation and delegitimization of the existing societal fabric; secondly, the removal of all reference to the previous society; and finally, the reconstruction of society in keeping with a new ideology or political religion. Although not necessarily appearing in a sequential process, all must be present in some form to exhibit a coherent strategy of iconoclasm.

Jihadism and Iconoclasm

Before analyzing the Islamic State's strategy of iconoclasm it is necessary to consider the logic of iconoclasm within the context of the ideology, or political religion, which Islamic State

professes[32] This has been the subject of recent scholarly debate.[33] Central to this debate is the extent to which Islamic State's thinking represents a form of Salafi-jihadism or a distinctively modern formatting of Islam to fashion a distinctively millennial '*homo islamicus'*.[34] Salafism, as understood by what Olivier Roy somewhat disparagingly terms 'Islamologists',[35] represents a distinctive interpretation of Islam, which stripped of later accretions, promulgates the strict replication of the life of the Prophet Mohammad and his rightly guided followers the *rashidun* in contemporary practice. Sunni Salafi-Jihadism may be differentiated from non-violent forms of Salafism, according to Quintan Wiktorowicz, in that it deems the current geo-political climate to require violent revolutionary jihad in order to restore religious practice to the rightly guided path. Crucial to Salafist belief is the notion of *tawhid*, the unity of God. *Tawhid* amalgamates three concepts: *Tawhid al-rububiyya*, the oneness of Lordship, or that one God is the creator of all (monotheism opposed to polytheism); *tawhid al-asma wa-l-sifat*, oneness of names, qualities and attributes, meaning that God is supreme and unique (the rejection of secularism); *tawhid al-uluhiyya*, oneness of worship, meaning that God alone has the right to be worshipped.[36]

The latter practice transforms Islam into a living ideal and, in its Salafi-Jihadist recension, requires action because 'god requires affirmative acts to confirm belief and… this characteristic is what distinguishes a Muslim'.[37] Shiraz Maher argues that simply stating one's belief in Islam and recognizing God as a unified deity, a Muslim only fulfils the requirements for *tawhid al-rubuiyya* and *tawhid al-asma wa-l-sifat. Tawhid al-uluhiyya* would remain unfulfilled because God was not actively worshiped. A Muslim who is 'passive' is 'un-practicing' and thus heterodox. Faith necessitates 'affirmative action'.[38] Drawing on the work of Abdullah Azzam, Maher further claims that the positive acts are necessary for *tawhid al-uluhiyya* and can only be sustained through 'stances taken in life'.[39] Gilles Keppel similarly identifies an emerging Jihadist dialectic combining the search for 'an all encompassing conception of Islam inspired by the Salafism of the Arabian

peninsula and a fervent consultation of a digital "Islamosphere" full of norms and injunctions breaking with the "infidel" model of the West'.[40] Contrasting its alternative lifestyle with generalized 'misbelief', rigorist Salafism reserves salvation for an 'elect alone'.[41] It thus considers affirmative action demanding the prevention of *shirk* (idolatry). *Shirk*, moreover, is the basis of Islamic State's hostility to any idolatrous reverence of the past, particularly of the pre-Islamic *Jahiliya* era.

Notwithstanding these claims, it is evident that Islamic State and its precursor, al-Qaeda, adopt distinctively heterodox approaches to charismatic leaders, martyrs, venerated personages and apocalyptic violence that sits uneasily even with even the most rigorist readings of orthodox Sunni Salafism. As Faisal Devji shows, 'the jihad abandons the authorities and the heartlands of Islam by taking to the peripheries assuming there a charismatic, mystical and even heretical countenance that dismembers the old social and religious distinctions of Islam'.[42] Analogously, Olivier Roy observes, the jihadi finds a better translation of their relationship to violence, sex and death in Islamic State's 'religious terms than in Salafism which is more puritanical and less fascinated by violence'.[43] The contemporary jihadi, although not necessarily unsympathetic to Salafism, is a distinctly post-modern figure practicing a nomadism that leaves the real world behind for a 'jihadi imaginary'.[44] In this context its cult of martyrdom and violence fits within 'a very modern aesthetics of heroism and violence'.[45] Significantly, the techniques of reality television inform Islamic State's videos. Indeed, the jihad's world of 'reference is far more connected to the dreams and nightmares of the media than it is to any traditional school of Islamic jurisprudence'.[46]

Moreover, the jihadi's fascination with death and martyrdom is linked to an apocalyptic discourse, absent from Sunni legalism. Islamic State's conviction 'that the end of the world is near' is both central and new. As a result it assumes that 'there is no other perspective than war

and total…victory'. As Roy observes, 'this is not utopia, but nihilism'.[47] Martyrdom is therefore messianic. Consequently, the jihadist endeavour to create a new society from scratch is ultimately both nihilistic and iconoclastic.[48] From this perspective, 'Islam comes to exist universally in the places where its particularity is destroyed, the presence of its ruins on television screens bearing witness to Muslim's universality as martyr and militant'.[49]

In this apocalyptic context, Islamic State's online English language magazine, *Dabiq* explains the necessity of thwarting the spread of *shirk*. It argues that the 'conspiracy theories' of polytheism (which can be understood to mean symbols of the *kuffar*,[50] or non-believers) exaggerate the power of its opponents to such an extent that 'Muslims become paralyzed by analysis of current events and eventually fear the kuffār more than they fear Allah'.[51] Belief in a Manichean battle with polytheism permeates jhadist discourse and justifies a recourse to violence to prevent the spread of *shirk*. According to the key Islamic State text, Abu Bakr Naji's *The Management of Savagery*, 'our battle is a battle of *tawhid* against unbelief and faith against the spread of polytheism'.[52] This interpretation draws on the life of Mohammad, and emphasizes his destruction of the idols around the *Ka'ba* upon conquering Mecca.

A number of post-war political theorists like Leo Strauss, Albert Camus, Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt have notably dissected the modern relationship between liberalism, totalitarianism and nihilism, that sheds an interesting philosophical perspective on the appeal Jihadism exerts as a political religion, and the logic of Islamic State's iconoclasm.[53] These writers observed that modern liberal, secular societies evinced a relativism, which incubated, somewhat paradoxically, two varieties of nihilism.[54] The first is a brutal nihilism of the kind that led to Nazism and Marxism in Europe. Such activist ideologies seek to destroy all tradition, culture, history and ethics and replace them, as seen in Warsaw, through subjugation and conquest with a new vision of a worldly utopia. The second offers a more docile alternative that merely aspires to

an aimless, postmodern, bourgeois, secularism free from serious value commitments.[55] Comparing this condition with Fred Halliday's observation that through 'its own universalism… Islam is a religion without overt ethnic or regional particularism, one that aspires to encompass all of humanity within its compass, and which regards other religions and traditions as, comparatively, inferior',[56] Jihadism may be understood as an illiberal, 'total ideological' panacea, which 'aggregates the entirety of human existence and organization within its system'.[57] As jihadism considers everything other than authenticity as *bid'a* (heretical innovation), it tends towards brutal nihilism 'with its desire to forcibly replace everything other than itself… its adherents also recoil at the 'permissive egalitarianism' of contemporary societies, seeking a return to more assured – albeit absolutist – times'.[58]

Ultimately, the jihadist worldview constitutes a gnostic, millennial and nihilistic, political religion. Employing the conceptual tools outlined above, it is plausible to assess whether Islamic State has employed a consistent logic of iconoclasm. The remainder of this study will therefore consider three case studies to test the logic of iconoclasm hypothesis: Palmyra; Shi'a, Sufi and Sunni heritage; and Mosul. These separate cases will then be compared in the final section to see whether a logic of iconoclasm or iconomachy may be confirmed.

Case Study 1 – Palmyra

The city of Palmyra is located northeast of Damascus, in the Homs Governorate of Syria, and dates as back to the second millennium BCE, primarily being associated with the Palmyrene and Roman Empires. In 1980 UNESCO designated it a World Heritage site and in 2013 placed it on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger, along with the five other UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria.[59] In mid-2015 Islamic State forces captured Palmyra. Upon entering the ancient city, Islamic State identified the political capital that could be gained from destroying the

ancient heritage given the international chorus of experts calling for the preservation of such culturally important pre-Islamic sites.[60]

The reason international expertise unanimously condemns the destruction of heritage is complex. Marxists like Stuart Hall, argue – somewhat predictably – that there is a relationship between Western imperialism and heritage. Heritage, Hall contends, constitutes the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation, a collective representation of 'tradition', and, hence, becomes a pivotal concept in the lexicon of Western virtues.[61] Moreover, heritage also implies a symbolic power to 'order, to rank, classify, and arrange, and thus to give meaning to objects and things through the imposition of interpretative schemas'.[62] Such a relationship between symbolic power and education means that 'though strangers to one another, we form an 'imagined community' because we share an *idea* of the nation state and what it stands for [through cultural heritage]… identity thus depends on cultural heritage, which binds each member individually into the large national story'.[63] Henry Cleere further maintains that these notions inhabit a post-Enlightenment paradigm, where the focus moves from a 'spiritual' to a 'cultural' continuity.[64] Consequently, the appreciation of the material culture of a secular present overdetermines the heritage of a spiritual or religious past, thereby sustaining European political understandings of nationhood as well as a shared European identity. Whether or not one accepts this characterization of European self-understanding, it nevertheless is plausible to argue that the contingent promulgation of cultural continuity through the preservation of the past secures national, regional and secular identities.

This European and subsequently United Nations sponsored approach to heritage might therefore be seen as transferring to other parts of the world and their heritage sites, a distinctly Western approach to the preservation of non-Western cultures.[65] From this perspective, the significance of heritage lies in the value ascribed to it by its stakeholders. Therefore, when

Islamic State degrades a cultural artefact like Palmyra, embodying cultural values that a secular Western aesthetic applauds, it can be seen not only as an attack on the heritage itself, but on the secular and culturally pluralist values a liberal Western cosmopolitanism ascribes to it.

Whether Islamic State understands *why* a Western aesthetic reveres heritage is not necessarily germane to its logic of destruction. What Islamic State does appreciate, however, is that imbricating cultural heritage destruction within a wider propaganda programme advances its ideology precisely *because* it anathematizes the West's reverence for cultural heritage. Furthermore, the way that Islamic State leverages territorial advantages obtained through control of cultural sites shows a degree of strategic insight. More precisely, the case of Palmyra exhibits a carefully orchestrated campaign of targeted destruction and performative showmanship.

Targeted destruction in Palmyra and the recourse to media driven, performative showmanship

Rather than destroying Palmyra in the most efficient way possible, Islamic State, almost immediately, securitized the ancient ruins through measures like extensive land mining.[66] The tactical outcome was two-fold: demonstrating that the ruins could, if necessary, be destroyed with ease; whilst also forcing government forces and coalition bombers to avoid engaging Islamic State fighters within the ancient city. Furthermore, these measures provided time and opportunity for Islamic State to conceive a way to exploit further its already successful media campaign that began with the destruction of artefacts from the Mosul Museum.

On 26 February 2016, Islamic State posted a video on YouTube showing the destruction of these artefacts.[67] The video sparked a heated debate on social media about what was being destroyed in the video and why. Broadcast across the Internet, screenshots appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the globe and continued to be re-circulated on an unquantifiable number of outlets and platforms.[68] Harmansah states that many consumers experienced 'visceral

reactions' to the video and continued to disseminate it both to inform others and to declare 'their own cosmopolitan, humanitarian, civilized condemnation of these uncivilized acts against antiquities'.[69] The denunciation of the acts as 'uncivilized' appearing in a major archaeological journal, from the jihadist perspective, merely revealed the secular and *kuffar* value-laden assumptions permeating the reaction to cultural destruction. Crucially, Islamic State's propaganda arm considered the success derived from the widespread propagation of its video together with the subsequent outpouring of Western disgust, a model for future campaigns of heritage destruction.

Upon capturing Palmyra the concern that Islamic State would simply flatten the city proved unfounded.[70] Understanding its success in Mosul meant that Islamic State could quantify the propaganda value derived from a careful dissemination of videos. Therefore, rather than destroy large sections of the city, Islamic State slowly but systematically destroyed key heritage features, such as the Arch of Triumph, in stages, in order to maximize the media coverage and propaganda value of its actions.[71] Multiple outputs depicted the destruction of epigraphs and statues, which could have been more easily destroyed with explosives along with larger structures. Instead, Islamic State gained added symbolic value from the performance of destruction. Rather than using explosives and power tools, Islamic State's film unit depicted fighters using their hands to topple statues, or pickaxes and sledgehammers to deface them, symbolically reinforcing the narrative that they were continuing the work of Mohammad in casting out idols after conquering Mecca. *Dabiq* clarified the point thus:

> Last month, the soldiers of the Khilāfah, with sledgehammers in hand, revived the Sunnah of their father Ibrāhīm ('alayhis-salām) when they laid waste to the shirkī legacy of a nation that had long passed from the face of the Earth. They entered the ruins of the ancient Assyrians in Wilāyat Nīnawā and demolished their statues, sculptures, and engravings of idols and kings. This caused an outcry from the enemies of the Islamic State, who were furious at losing a 'treasured heritage'. The mujāhidīn, however, were not the least bit concerned about the feelings and sentiments of the kuffār, just as Ibrāhīm was not concerned about the feelings and sentiments of his people when he

> destroyed their idols. With the kuffār up in arms over the large-scale destruction at the hands of the Islamic State, the actions of the mujāhidīn had not only emulated Ibrāhīm's ('alayhis-salām) destruction of the idols of his people and Prophet Muhammad's (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) destruction of the idols present around the Ka'bah when he conquered Makkah, but had also served to enrage the kuffār, a deed that in itself is beloved to Allah.[72]

Islamic State's representation of its iconoclastic destruction of Palmyra achieved a number of goals, ranging from the degradation of the existing fabric of society to the propagation of a nihilistic millenarianism actively preventing the spread of *shirk*, all transmitted via a global media platform.

Strategic leveraging

Whilst the focus of discussion about Palmyra concentrated on the damage to the ancient city, it would be remiss to ignore the city's importance for the supply of gas to major Syrian regions to the west. Capturing Palmyra in May 2015, Islamic State also seized a number of local gas fields. A 2016 report by the International Monetary Fund estimated that 'after ISIL's seizure in early 2015 of the gas fields near Palmyra, production was projected to have fallen to 0.4 billion cubic feet per day', down from 1.1 bcfpd in 2010.[73]

Securing these fields afforded Islamic State significant leverage over the Syrian regime. As Isabelle Duyvesteyn notes: 'resource considerations are important factors motivating individuals to take up their weapons'.[74] The Jabal Shaer gas fields, located approximately 150 kilometres northwest of Palmyra, have been embroiled in an almost continuous battle for their control since July 2014.[75] Other gas fields such as Hail and Arak have also been centres of fighting since Islamic State began contesting control of Palmyra in 2014. The gas fields surrounding Palmyra are critical for the supply of power to key regime strongholds, not least Damascus. Estimates suggests that 90 percent of Syria's electricity infrastructure relies on gas

extraction. Furthermore, Palmyra acts as a transit point for pipelines carrying gas from northeastern gas fields in Deir ez-Zor, which are currently being contested by the newly formed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.[76] Control of these sites therefore put Islamic State in a position to apply leverage and extract concessions from, the Syrian regime. A good example of Islamic State exploiting this leverage is the destruction of the Furqlus pipeline in 2015, which, again, was critical to the regime's gas supply.

Before 2016, validating Islamic State's strategic leveraging of its control over vital resources was a matter of conjecture. However, in May 2016 a document by Foreign Reports Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm focusing on oil and politics in the Middle East, reported that Islamic State was turning gas from Palmyrene oil fields into fuel to be sold to the regime.[77] Analysis of the document leaked to Sky News corroborated the claim demonstrating evidence of formal arrangements between Islamic State and the Syrian regime with regard to the transfer and exchange of resources. Furthermore, the document also suggested that Islamic State leveraged its control of resources to secure the safe withdrawal of weapons from Palmyra before the regime retook the city.[78]

Case Study 2 – Shi'a, Sunni and Sufi Heritage

Transnational millennarian groups across the Middle East and North Africa favour intentional, ideologically driven, destruction as the means for furthering jihad. For example, Ansar al-Din captured Timbuktu in 2012 and commenced a systematic campaign of destruction against heritage sites in the city. The reasoning was clear. The sites were fifteenth century Sufi mausoleums, which jihadist groups considered to be *shirk* as well as symbols of polytheism. Ansar al-Din's Sanda Ould Boumama explained the reasoning: 'God is unique. All of this is haram [forbidden in Islamic law]'.[79] Similarly, Ibrahim Suleiman al Rabaish of Al-Qaeda in the

Arabian Peninsula extolled the destruction of ancient Yemini tombs declaring: 'here are the mujahideen… reviving their jihad in the cause of Allah… they are destroying the domes which are being worshipped other than Allah, along with the graves and mausoleums'.[80] Islamic State's cultural destruction follows this logic closely. Whilst the destruction of famous sites such as Palmyra attracts most attention in Western media, its campaign of destruction is ubiquitous, and much of it does not make the headlines. This lower key destruction feeds into the broader aim of cultural obliteration, placing territories in its grasp on a trajectory towards religious homogenization.[81]

Since its inception, Islamic State has consistently attacked places of religious and cultural significance across Iraq and Syria. As Sunni Islam considers the Shi'a interpretation of Islam heretical, Islamic State has targeted Shi'a sites with particular ferocity. Islamic State attacked the following sites in 2014: 24-26 June, Islamic State reportedly destroyed several of Tal Afar's Shia mosques, including the Shia Sheikh Jawad Mosque, Qaddo Mosque, the Mosque of Imam Saad bin Aqeel and the Mosque of the Martyr of Lashkar-e-Mulla; 5 July, 2014 Islamic State release photos depicting the demolition of the tomb and shrine of Sheikh Fathih in Mosul in addition to reportedly destroying a further six mosques and 3 Sunni and Shia shrines; 24 July, a mosque in the Al-Muthanna neighbourhood of Mosul was attacked, resulting in a number of Shia leaders being arrested; 26 July, the Nabi Jarjees shrine, the Qatheed al-Ban shrines in Mosul were destroyed. The following week Islamic State reportedly deployed an IED to destroy a 600 year old mosque and 30 Shia Muslim Shrines in Mosul. On 3 August the Shi'a shrine of Sayida Zainab and Saiyed Zakariya in Sinjar were destroyed. On 24 October Islamic State destroyed the Shoaib Dome, a Shia shrine, in the Sal ad Din province, and in December, the Tomb of Sheikh Hamoud al-Hamoud al-Mahmoud and a number of other tombs were destroyed north of Fallujah.

Sunni, Sufi, Christian and secular heritage sites also came under sustained attack from Islamic State forces. In June, Islamic State destroyed parts of the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud using IEDs and bulldozers. On 5 July, Islamic State was reported to have removed crosses from Chaldean and Orthodox cathedrals and replaced them with Islamic State flags in Muhafazat, Nineveh. On 7 July, Islamic State removed the cross from the dome of the St Ephrem Cathedral in Mosul. Later in July, Islamic State forces destroyed the mosque of the Prophet Yunus (the Old Testament Jonah), at a site that was originally an Assyrian Church, and the shrine of the Prophet Sheth in Mosul. In August, Islamic State captured the Christian village of Qaraqosh in Iraq before turning churches into firing ranges and destroying the crosses that sit atop them. The bell from Iraq's largest Christian church, the Church of Immaculate Conception, was stolen and Christian pilgrimage sites, the church of St Behnam and St Sarah, were also destroyed. Two ethnic Yazidi shrines were also destroyed in the town of Sinjar in August. Additionally, Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack on the Sunni mosque of Musab Bin Uayr in Diyala province on 22 August that killed an unspecified number of men. On 12 September Islamic State destroyed an Orthodox church in the al-Muhaniseen area of Mosul. On 25 October an Islamic State IED destroyed the Amerdan shrine, near Mount Sinjar in Iraq. The following day an IED also destroyed the Sheikh Mehdi al-Janabi Sufi shrine. Continuing into November, the Sufi shrine of Sheikh Saleh, in south Kirkuk was destroyed by Islamic State militants and an IED in the city of Tikrit destroyed saw the tomb of Hussein al Majid, father of former Dictator Saddam Hussein. It is significant that all this demolition occurred in just the latter part of 2014, solely in Iraq. Moreover, this is not an exhaustive list, for even this short period. This rate of destruction continues to be pervasive across Islamic State held territory.[82]

Civil Unrest

Despite the concerted effort to erase everything considered *shirk*, and homogenize the communities under its control by eliminating any resistance, there have nevertheless been instances of civil resistance within Islamic State territories. The summer 2014 Sha'itat tribal uprising in the town of Abu Hamam, located in the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor, was the most serious. A 'damage density' map produced through satellite imagery by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, suggested that by late 2014 the city had suffered the damage or destruction of 3,112 structures.[83] Whilst the map did not specify what had been damaged, anecdotal reports – for example, of Deir ez-Zor's Armenian Genocide Martyrs' Memorial Church being destroyed – made it reasonable to assume that Islamic State had subjected the region to a systematic pattern of violence against cultural heritage.[84]

In the face of such attacks, the Sha'itat tribe, which estimates consist of between 70,000 to 150,000 members, revolted against Islamic State's rule for reasons including, but not limited to, the destruction of villages, the imposition of sectarian rule and economic disputes.[85] However, it was the manner in which the dispute escalated that is salient to the logic of iconoclasm. A report in the *Washington Post* noted that as life under Islamic State became more uncompromisingly sectarian, the public whipping of a man for smoking a cigarette brought local discontent to a head.[86] The incident provoked the man's brother to shoot at a passing Islamic State patrol, killing one fighter, which led to his execution. In turn, this caused an 'outpouring of rage' and the expulsion of Islamic State from the village.[87]

Islamic State forces withdrew to a safe distance outside the town to await reinforcements. Once these arrived, Islamic State deployed artillery to shell the town for three consecutive days, causing catastrophic damage to the built environment. Islamic State fighters recaptured the town, rounded up all males over the age of 15, and executed them, leading to a

number reports of mass graves holding upwards of 200 bodies.[88] Further reports by the Syrian Network for Human Rights contend that Islamic State had displaced up to 33,000 people from the town of Abu Hamam, and issued a 'Fatwa' (an Islamic legal pronouncement) legitimizing the confiscation and destruction of property. Later it was reported that Islamic State did begin to allow residents to return to the town, but only if they agreed to a stringent list of terms and conditions. [89]

Whilst evidence of the specific destruction and targeting of cultural heritage in the Sha'itat uprising is limited, Islamic State's conduct demonstrates the workings of the strategy of iconoclasm. The strategy requires viewing from a macro perspective in order to observe the intersection of different elements across time and space to create a coherent logic. Thus, the expulsion of the population followed by the gradual return under strict terms and conditions means those who do return accord with Islamic State's desired demographic outcome. The sustained application of such tactics in combination with the continual degradation of reference points to a pre-Islamic/non-Salafi history facilitates Islamic State's objective of forging homogenous communities across the regions it controls. In a manner not dissimilar from the Warsaw Uprisings, civil unrest in places like Deir ez-Zor illustrates that Islamic State's rule creates the conditions for civil unrest but also, in the course of its suppression, the circumstances through which its goal of cultural obliteration can be furthered. Understanding this point enables us to arrive at a more complete understanding of strategy of iconoclasm.

Case Study 3 – Mosul

Given the relative infancy of Islamic State, combined with the fact that most cities under its control tend to be embroiled in civil war, means there have been limited opportunities for it to exhibit the reconstruction that forms the third variable in the strategy of iconoclasm. There are,

though, indications of what the movement intended to do, given the opportunity. The best example was the Iraqi city of Mosul.

After the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003, Mosul witnessed anti-coalition and anti-government insurgencies. These were primarily associated with al-Qaeda in Iraq, which wanted to depose 'infidels and apostates' before establishing a *shari'a* governed state.[90] Historically, Mosul was considered a city 'vibrant with art, culture, coffee shops, and social events. Segregation between men and women was rare and there was no pressure, legal or social, to live according to *shari'ah*-leaning conservatism'.[91] In June 2014, following the large-scale withdrawal of U.S. forces and the decline of the country into another round of internecine strife, Iraqi army units abandoned the city, leaving Islamic State fighters free to consolidate their control. Initially, the capture of Mosul was thought to be a temporary setback for the Iraqi government, but the efficiency with which Islamic State secured the city meant that it turned into a major defeat.[92]

Within five days of Mosul's capture, Islamic State began to distribute a '*wathiqat al-madina*', or charter of the city, to the remaining residents. The charter outlined Islamic State's governance of the city in accordance with *shari'a*. The charter required *inter alia* that:

- Our stance on tombs, shirk [polytheistic] shrines, and pagan sites, follows what Prophet Muhammed said: 'Do not leave a state but obliterated or a tomb but effaced'.

- To the virtuous women: stay in your homes and do not leave them only in cases of necessity. That is guidance of the Mother of the Believers and the dignified female companions, may Allah be content with them.[93]

The *wathiqat al-madina* is significant because it provides insight into how Islamic State envisages rule. The *wathiqat al-madina* also addressed the role of Christians living under Islamic State, who were ordered either to pay a heavy tax or leave the city. Any remaining Christian heritage was turned into market places for fighters to sell their spoils of war or simply defaced or destroyed.[94] Islamic State's occupation of Mosul therefore demonstrated a concerted attempt to degrade the existing fabric of society by removing large sections of the population and removing and delegitimizing symbols associated with polytheism or Christianity.

Whilst assessments of Islamic State's theocratic new order are not uncommon, as Aaron Zelin notes, its use of 'soft power' and civil engineering strategies are often overlooked.[95] Following the attempt to cleanse the city of anything not aligned with Islamic State's religiosity, the movement invested in public works in order to win popular support. Although Islamic State did not promote projects to reconstruct the city of Mosul in the way the Nazis did in Warsaw, it did attempt to introduce institutions designed to reinforce a paradigmatic shift in the populace. For example, the *wathiqat al-madina* implemented a system that combined social services with religious indoctrination. This policy was intended to alter irreversibly the population's relationship to its intangible heritage.[96] Intangible heritage comprises the 'intricate and complex web of meaningful social actions undertaken by individuals, groups and institutions'.[97] The survival of complex cultures rests on a delicate web of factors, which, Kurin argues, includes 'the freedom and desire of culture bearers, an adequate environment, a sustaining economic system, a political context within which their very existence is at least tolerated'.[98] Consequently, introducing a legal system based on *shari'a* that did not tolerate Mosul's secular history and civic society inexorably degraded the city's existing intangible heritage, and facilitated the population's rectification from *shirk*.

Iconoclasm in Practice

This discussion indicates that Islamic State's management of cultural heritage can be best understood as a strategy. Furthermore, the evidence of its operation in practice reveals that the strategy serves both pragmatic and dogmatic goals. This dichotomy highlights a paradox within Islamic State's rhetoric. Whilst Islamic State explicitly espouses its intention to prevent the spread of *shirk*, and to realize *tawhid* [oneness of God], its strategy also discloses a degree of pragmatism at odds with this primary goal. If Islamic State were solely concerned with doctrinal purity its strategy would dogmatically accord to scripture with little attention paid to any material benefits derived from the control and management of cultural heritage. We shall next elucidate this paradox in the light of the case studies examined. Treating Islamic State's strategy in this manner enables us to determine the distinctive form of Islamic State's iconoclastic logic.

Pragmatism

Clausewitz argued: 'history has certainly not guided us to any recurrent forms… it is plain that circumstances exert an influence that cuts across all general principles… A critic has no right to rank the various styles and methods that emerge as if they were stages of excellence, subordinating one to the other. They exist side by side, and their use must be judged on its merits in each individual case'.[99] Clausewitz's appreciation of strategy is that it needs to be flexible and react meaningfully to the circumstances of the moment. To have utility, strategy has to be pragmatic, because it is 'an attempt [or threat thereof] to make concrete a set of objectives through the application of military force to a particular case'.[100] Moreover, taken together with the observation that war and policy are continuations of one another, it makes sense to comprehend the way in which strategies are pragmatically constructed, and subsequently implemented, to achieve desired ends. Furthermore, Clausewitz maintained that striking at the

schwerpunkt, or the 'centre of gravity', provides one of the clearest routes to victory.[101] An enemy's centre of gravity is variable and can be what matters to an opponent, or what you make matter to an opponent, but it is most often associated with the capture of the enemy's capital or the defeat of its main armies in battle. The point is, however, that it is a pragmatic consideration that connects military operations to political outcomes.

Islamic State's targeting of the Syrian regime's perceived centre of gravity demonstrates the pragmatic nature of its strategy. Simpson notes: 'the capture of a fortress, for example, may be of no military significance… but may be significant as a prize in wars fought for more limited political advantage'.[102] Palmyra represents just such a pragmatic lever to gain a political advantage over an opponent through their centre of gravity. As has been pointed out, the Syrian capital, Damascus, is almost wholly reliant either upon the gas extracted in the fields surrounding Palmyra or the gas piped through the region from Syria's eastern provinces. Additionally, the Syrian regime has been locked in a battle with rebel forces in Damascus since the start of the civil war with the regime drawing on support from Iranian and Hezbollah forces to maintain a degree of control.[103] Clearly, Damascus represents the regime's centre of gravity, and holding it is crucial to its survival.[104] These facts have enabled Islamic State to manipulate the regime by targeting the capital's power supply. Damascus has been hit by continual power outages, with reports suggesting that Syria as a whole is '83 percent darker at night that it was before the war',[105] thus turning electricity into an economic asset to be leveraged or sold for profit. When resources in war become scarce then the politics and the forms of war often reflect this fact as we have seen with Islamic State's leveraging of the Syrian regime into negotiating concessions for resources.[106]

Beyond leveraging the supply of natural resources derived from Palmyra, the way in which Islamic State promulgated the destruction of Palmyra further illustrates its pragmatism. It

might be useful here to construct a strategic narrative, which Simpson defines as the explanation of actions identified before, during and after a conflict. 'A policy outcome', he maintains, 'is ultimately an impression upon an audience. It can be a physical impression…[or] a psychological impression, typically defined in terms of an evolution in political alignment, not necessarily by consent. For strategy to connect action to policy it must therefore invest them with a given meaning in relation to its audiences, both prospectively and retrospectively'.[107]

The question that this raises is what meaning did Islamic State hope to invest in the propagation of Palmyra's destruction and what evolution of political alignment did it hope to achieve? The meaning that Islamic State attributes to its actions is that its members are emulating the life of Mohammad, who was required to 'make *tawhid* known [with] open enmity and disavowal towards *shirk*'.[108] The performative nature of the destruction captured on video at Palmyra appropriates the heritage of the legacy, transmogrifying it into a religious genealogy to enrich Islamic State's media narrative.[109] An iconic act of violence can, in the words of Boal, et al, 'take over the image-machinery for a moment – and a moment, in the timeless echo chamber of the spectacle, may now eternally be all there is'.[110] The dissemination of the image is designed to mobilize its consumers. The heritage that is chosen for destruction is chosen to fit with the historicized re-enactment of idol destruction. The media coverage of these acts is widely publicized as the antithesis of Western, secular liberal democracy and constitutes the *raison d'etre* for Islamic State's promulgation of this mode of cultural destruction.

In terms, then, of the desired change in political alignment that such propaganda hopes to achieve, it feeds into a general desire to transform ordinary Muslims into 'violent-rejectionists',[111] or what is commonly termed 'Jihadis' (Holy warriors). The construction of a strategic narrative is 'designed to persuade people of something'.[112] Considering that Islamic State broadly considers that 'all tenets of secularism – including nationalism, communism, and

Baathism – are a blatant violation of Islam',[113] it is logical to conclude that a large part of Islamic State's purpose is to persuade the broader Muslim population to come to the same realization. Maher observes: 'violent-rejectionists are irreconcilably estranged from the state, regarding it as a heretical and artificial unit. The entire notion of the modern nation-state is a heterodox affront to Islam whereby temporal legislation usurps God's sovereignty'. From this perspective: 'The system needs radical overhaul and re-ordering while its agents must be confronted'. 'Armed and violent rebellion against them is an individual duty on every Muslim'.[114] Thus, the evolution of political alignment requires the transformation of Muslims from passive onlookers to violent-rejectionists, who understand and act upon their obligations to satisfy the tenets of *tawhid* and prevent the spread of *shirk*. Destroying parts of Palmyra, rather than destroying it in its entirety, appears therefore a logical practice to advance this agenda. Maximizing the amount of media coverage gained by gradually increasing the grandeur of destruction over a sustained period of time shows how Islamic State profits through this pragmatism.

Dogmatism

Understanding a dogmatic application of doctrine, theological, military or otherwise, from a strategic perspective is complex. Whilst the analysis has thus far sought to demonstrate Islamic State's iconoclasm to be strategic, it is possible to invert such thinking by pointing to a puzzle Simpson identified, namely: to 'Dogmatically… retain a political aim in conflicts which are of lower stakes than national survival is potentially to push military activity further than its political unity'.[115] Pursuing a policy for any other reason than the needs of survival treads a dangerous line between the desire to win via the attainment of realizable goals, and a counterproductive, unyielding approach rooted in a rigid application of orthodoxy for its own sake.

Islamic State's doctrine, in relation to cultural heritage, has focused on eliminating *shirk* and affirming God's oneness. In a 2007 speech Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi quoted a Wahhabi-trained scholar on the purpose of jihad: 'The end to which fighting the unbelievers leads is no idolater (*mushrik*) remaining in the world'.[116] In another speech Baghdadi emphasized the importance of destroying any 'statues' or 'graves' associated with *shirk*:

> We believe in the necessity of destroying and eradicating all manifestations of idolatry and prohibiting those things that lead to it, on account of what the Imam Muslim transmitted in his Sahih on the authority of Abu 'l-Hayaj al-Asadi, who said: 'Ali ibn Abi Talib—may God be pleased with him—said to me: Should I not urge you to do what the Messenger of God—may God bless and save him—urged me to do? That you not leave a statue without obliterating it, or a raised grave without leveling it?'[117]

However, if Clausewitz's observation that there are no truly hard lessons of war[118] is applied, it raises the paradox that all war is unique, yet all doctrine is, in theory, static and unmoveable.[119] Ultimately, this paradox is irresolvable. This clash of rigid doctrine and the exceptionality of war come together in the assault on the al-Askari shrine in the Iraqi city of Samarra.

Shi'a Islam considers the al-Askari shrine one of its holiest sites. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Al-Qaeda in Iraq movement bombed the shrine in 2006 in a 'well executed commando-style… raid of insurgents dressed as Iraqi police'.[120] This act intentionally sparked Iraq's brutal sectarian conflict.[121] Following the attack, violence by sectarian militias across the country grew exponentially. Come 2014, when what was then called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, began its northern Iraq offensive there was great concern amongst Shi'a communities regarding the safety of the shrine. By June 2014 the ISIL offensive gained considerable ground around Samarra after insurgents armed with rocket-propelled grenades, anti-aircraft weapons, heavy weaponry and armoured vehicles took the districts of Muthanna, al-Jubairiyah, Salaheddine, al-Shuhada and destroyed the Rasasi bridge leading into Samarra.[122] Subsequently, Islamic State announced that it considered the destruction of the al-Askari shrine the primary objective.[123] However, declaring its primary target in advance of actually being in a

position to capture it illustrated the strategic weakness in Islamic State's dogmatism. The announcement gave the Iraqi army, and Iraqi population more generally, forewarning that the shrine would be destroyed upon capture. This catalyzed two events: first, the Iraqi army conducted a mass offensive to drive ISIL out of the neighbourhoods it had captured through artillery shelling and airstrikes from newly delivered Russian Sukhoi 25 warplanes, which provided close air support.[124] Second, it enabled the mobilization of Shi'a militiamen who were positioned around the shrine to protect it from ISIL attacks.[125] The result was that ISIL forces deployed to capture the city withdrew (subsequently joining the successful offensive to capture Mosul).[126] Thus, through doctrinal rigidity ISIL betrayed its strategic position by not taking account of broader considerations, arguably to the detriment of its own stated goals. If ISIL had done so it would have concluded, from the response to al-Zaqarwi's bomb attack in 2006, that drawing as little attention as possible to its real target would have provided the best possible chance of success. In reality the threat to destroy the shrine was seen as an escalation of the conflict resulting in increased preparations on the part of the Iraqi state to thwart ISIL's objectives.

The Logic of Islamic State's Strategy of Iconoclasm

Returning to the trinity of factors that combine to constitute the logic of iconoclasm, we can now assess whether this logic prevailed in Islamic State's strategy of destruction. First, we contended that for a strategy of iconoclasm to exist it is necessary to degrade and delegitimize the existing fabric of society. The evidence to support this exists across each of the cases studies presented. Consider the proclamation of Islamic State commander Abu Leith in Palmyra: 'concerning the historical city… what we will do is to pulverise statues that the miscreants used to pray for'.[127] Additionally, followers of Sufism are regularly accused of *shirk, bid'a,* and of being

kuffars and polytheists. Islamic State's narrative, reinforced through its actions, consistently dehumanized adherents of other Islamic sects, representing them as the antithesis of the teachings of the Prophet, accusing them of incompetence in religious matters, and denouncing their heritage as idolatrous.

The ideology of Islamic State brings its adherents to a position where the degradation and de-legitimization of the symbols of polytheism is not only permissible but also desirable in order to maintain confessional authenticity. In this respect, the obligation in Islam to link 'salvation to works rather than just faith alone',[128] evolved heuristically as a 'series of global effects'[129] after 9/11 when Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri combined the ideas of *tawhid* with 'revolutionary change which involves the implementation of *shari'a*, political authority for Islam and an end to occupation'. 'The dichotomy between *tawhid* and everything else', Maher contends, 'was absolute… the practical outcome of this was… political absolutism… incapable of accepting compromise'.[130] Islamic State's rhetoric, whether it emanates from commanders at Palmyra or spiritual leaders like Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, are not isolated speech acts. They add up to a unified statement of political intent. Just as the statements of President Tudjman about Mostar or Himmler's about Warsaw were integral to their understandings of total obliteration, so too must we understand Islamic State's pronouncements in the same light.

Second, a strategy of iconoclasm requires the removal of all reference to the previous society. Arguably, this is the most important stage of iconoclasm for it acts as the bridge between ideology and practice, and is often exhibited in attempts to destroy the heterogeneity of the population. The ideology of Islamic State maintains that it is not merely acceptable to destroy heritage but that it is positively desirable in order to prevent the spread of unbelief. Islamic State's occupation techniques clearly demonstrate coordinated efforts to destroy pre-existing social structures. This is exemplified in the campaign of cultural destruction seen in the latter

part of 2014 in Iraq. These assaults were, on the whole, not undertaken to gain a military advantage. Indeed, the stated intention to attack the al-Askari shrine proved wholly counterproductive from a military perspective. Instead, such attacks were designed to alter the demographic composition of the population and the built environment. Mosul represents a good example. The capture of this formerly pluralistic, secular, city saw Islamic State attempting to break down heterogeneous communities, established over generations, by making clear that any lifestyle, not in accordance with *shari'a*, was repugnant and punishable.

Finally, it was argued that the attempt to reconstruct society in a manner consistent with the new order constitutes the final element in the logic of iconoclasm. The *wathiqat al-madina* suggests how Islamic State envisioned cities under its control should be governed. In practice, as Islamic State's occupation of Mosul again shows, its rule seeks to move the population towards an ultraconservative orthodoxy by introducing institutions, such as *shari'a* courts and religious lectures, that reinforce this paradigm shift. The response to the civil uprisings by the Sha'itat tribe in Deir ez-Zor region further illustrates this intent. The ferociousness of Islamic State's reaction to the challenge to its authority not only shocked the tribe into submission but also enabled Islamic State to expel large numbers of people from their homes, allowing the return only of those who agreed to live under a strictly defined code of *shari'a*. Islamic State's purpose in each case was to recreate society and to align the social and physical environment in accordance with its scriptural certitudes.

Conclusion

The destruction of heritage in Iraq and Syria by Islamic State is often interpreted as a challenge to secular Western notions of culture and tradition. Consequently, Islamic State's actions are frequently denounced as barbaric. Whilst understandable, this analysis has shown that such

denunciation obscures the intent underlying the strategy of Islamic State. The events in Iraq and Syria are, moreover, by no means unprecedented. Instead they fit within the conceptual boundaries of iconoclasm identified in earlier conflicts such as the Balkans and World War II. In this context, Islamic State's iconoclasm is a logical counterpart to its aestheticization of extreme, violence. Both are intended to induce a sense of hopelessness in its adversaries, and are recorded in videos and disseminated across the Internet.

Even so, it may also be argued that Islamic State's iconoclasm is failing. At the time of writing, Islamic State has lost both territory and fighters.[131] If – or when – its own 'capital' in Raqqa falls it may retreat into the shadow world of a clandestine jihadist network instead of functioning as a quasi-political entity that controls the monopoly of violence in a territorial unit of rule.

Nonetheless,, Islamic State's ability to seize and hold territory for several years attests to its effectiveness. No doubt, other factors such as Sunni anger at the Iraqi government's sectarian rule and the collapse of central authority in Syria following the country's descent into civil war also contributed to Islamic State's initial success This study has not sought to assess the efficacy of Islamic State's cultural destruction *per se* but to understand its instrumentalization, and to this end employed the precepts of strategic theory. Clausewitz may seem an unusual figure to introduce into an analysis of cultural heritage but his thinking remains pertinent. One of his most acute observations is that the outcome of conflict is never final because those who have been defeated often consider their loss transitory. To achieve a final victory the mind of the opponent must be subjugated. Conquering the mind cannot, however, be achieved purely by military force. Instead, it requires manipulating an opponent into recognizing that any further resistance to the new regime will be futile. This paper has demonstrated that conquering the mind through targeting the built environment are evident in Islamic State's strategic approach.

Clausewitz maintained that notions of force could be understood within a trinity: three autonomous elements united in one, arising out of the constant interplay of popular passions, reason and chance.[132] In terms of the strategy of iconoclasm, passion relates to the motivation of the iconoclast; chance relates to the opportunities that present themselves through capturing heritage sites; reason relates to the objectives that can be achieved through either dogmatic or pragmatic management of the captured heritage sites. It has also been demonstrated that the logic of iconoclasm possesses a further trinity that becomes manifest through the combination of independent variables: first, an attempt to degrade and delegitimize the existing fabric of society; second, the removal of references to the previous social order; and third, an attempt to reconstruct society in conformity to a new ideological order. For a strategy of iconoclasm to be confirmed these three elements need to be present. Whatever the future holds for Islamic State, this study has shown that all these elements were present in the territory it controlled between 2014 and 2017.

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1. For the purpose of this paper we shall refer to Islamic State rather than Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or its Arabic acronym Daesh from *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām.*
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